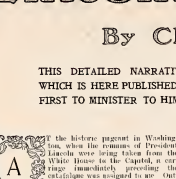
Lincoln's Last Hours

By Charles A. Leale, M.D.

THIS DETAILED NARRATIVE OF THE ASSASSINATION AND DEATH OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN, WHICH IS HERE PUBLISHED FOR THE FIRST TIME, WAS WRITTEN BY THE SURGEON WHO WAS THE FIRST TO MINISTER TO HIM AND WHO REMAINED UNINTERRUPTEDLY AT HIS SIDE TO THE END



FORD'S THEATRE IN TENTH STREET, WASHINGTON, IN WHICH LINCOLN WAS SHOT ON GOOD FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 14, 1865, BY JOHN WILKES BOOTH

At the historic pageant in Washington, when the remains of President Lincoln were borne from the White House to the Capitol, a carriage immediately preceding the catafalque was assigned to me. Outside were the crowds, the martial music, but inside the carriage I was plunged in deep self-communion,

until aroused by a gentle tap at the window of my carriage door. An officer of high rank put his head inside and exclaimed: "I would like to have a conference alone with you this morning." I shrank back at what he said, and for the first time realized the importance of it all. As soon as I returned to my private office in the hospital, I drew down the window-shade, locked the door, threw myself prostrate on the bare wood floor, and asked for advice. The answer came to me distinctly as if spoken by a human being present—"Forget it all." I visited our Surgeon-General, Joseph K. Barnes, and asked his advice; he also said, "Cast it from your memory."

On April 17, 1865, a New York newspaper reporter called at my army tent. I invited him in, and impressed my desire to forget all the recent sad events, and to occupy my mind with the exacting present employ for the future. Recently, however, several of our companions expressed the conviction that history now demands, and that it is my duty to give, the detailed facts of Lincoln's death, as I know them, and in compliance with that view I have prepared this paper on the subject.

One of the most cruel wars in the history of the world had nearly closed.

The people of the United States were rejoicing at the prospect of peace and returning happiness. President Lincoln, after the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, visited Richmond, Virginia, exposing himself to great danger, and on his return delivered an address from the balcony of the White House.

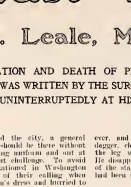
I was then a commissioned officer in the Medical Department of the United States Army, having been appointed from my native State, New York, and was on duty as surgeon in charge of the wounded commissioned officers' ward at the United States Army General Hospital, Armory Square, Washington. To relieve my professional duties were of the greatest importance and required constant and arduous attention. For a brief relief and a few moments in the fresh air, I strolled one evening, for a short walk, on Pennsylvania Avenue. There were crowds walking toward the President's residence. There I followed, and arrived just at the commencement of President Lincoln's last public address in his grounds. From where I stood I could distinctly hear every word he uttered, and I was profoundly impressed with his divine appearance as he stood in the rays of light which penetrated the windows of the White House.

The influence thus produced gave me an intense desire again to behold his face and study the characteristics of the Savior of his Country. Therefore, on the evening of April 14, 1865, after the completion of my daily hospital duties, I told my ward master that I would be absent for short time. As a very large number from the Army stationed near Washington frequently visited the city, a general order was in force that none should be there without a special pass; and all evening soldiers and out all night were subject to frequent challenge. To avoid the inconvenience others stationed in Washington generally removed all signs of their calling when off duty. I changed to civilian's dress and hurried to Ford's Theatre, where I had been told President Lincoln, General Grant, and members of the Cabinet were to be present to see the play, *Our American Cousin*. I arrived late at the theatre, at 8.15 P.M., and requested a seat in the orchestra, whence I could view the occupants of the President's box, which, on looking into the theatre, I saw had been beautifully decorated with American flags in honor of the occasion. As the building was crowded, the best place vacant was in the dress circle. I was greatly disappointed, but accepted this seat, which was near the front on the same side and about forty feet from the President's box, and soon became interested in the pleasing play.

Suddenly there was a cheering welcome, and the acting ceased temporarily out of respect to the entering Presidential party. Many in the audience rose to their feet in enthusiasm and vociferously cheered while looking around. Turning, I saw in the aisle a few feet behind me, President Lincoln, Mrs. Lincoln, Major Rathbone, and Miss Harris. Mrs. Lincoln smiled very happily in acknowledgment of the loyal greeting, gracefully curtsied several times, and seemed to be overflowing with good cheer and thankfulness. I had the best opportunity to see distinctly the full face of the President, as the light shone directly upon him. After he had walked a few feet he stopped for a moment, bowed upon the people he loved, and acknowledged their salutations with a solemn bow. His face was perfectly classic; his deportment gave him a pathetically sad appearance. The audience seemed to be enthusiastically cheerful, yet he looked peculiarly sorrowful, as he slowly walked with bowed head and drooping shoulders toward the box. He was looking at him as he took his last walk. The memory of that scene has never been effaced. The party was preceded by a special usher, who opened the door of the box, stood to one side, and, after all had entered, closed the door and took a seat outside, where he could guard the entrance to the box.

The play was resumed and my attention was concentrated on the stage, until I heard a disturbance at the door of the President's box. With many others I looked in that direction and saw a man endeavoring to persuade the doorkeeper to admit him. At last he succeeded in gaining an entrance, after which the door was closed and the usher resumed his place.

For a few moments all was quiet and the play was held my attention, until suddenly the report of a pistol was heard, and a short time after I saw a man in undue haste leaping from the President's box to the stage, brandishing in his hand a drawn dagger. His spur caught in the American flag festooned in front of the box, causing him to stumble when he struck the stage, and he fell on his hands and knees. He quickly regained the erect posture, however, and hopped across the stage, flourishing his dagger, clearing the stage before him and dragging the spur, which was subsequently found in he lowered. He disappeared behind the scene on the opposite side of the stage. Then followed cries that the President had been murdered, interspersed with cries of "Kill



DR. LEALE, WHO PLANNED AND DIRECTED THE TREATMENT OF THE MORTALLY WOUNDED PRESIDENT THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN IN WASHINGTON IN 1865

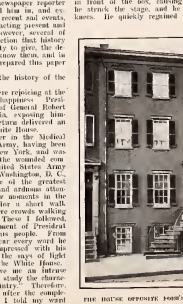
the murderer!" Shout burst after from different parts of the building. The whole house had risen instantly down, a general gloom was over all, and the pandemonium underneath me rankled within the doors for evil and safety.

I instantly arose, and in response to cries for help and for a surgeon I crossed the aisle and vaulted over the seats in a direct line to the President's box, forcing my way through the excited crowd. The door of the box had been securely fastened on the inside to prevent any one following the assassin before he had accomplished his cruel object and made his escape. The door-tenders was with difficulty removed, and I was the first to be admitted to the box.

The usher having been told that I was an army surgeon, had lifted up his arm and had permitted me to enter. I passed in, and in the slightest degree knowing what I had to encounter. At this moment, while in self-communion, the military command "Halt!" came to me, and in obedience to it I stood still in the box, having a full view of the four other occupants. Then came the advice, "Be calm!" and with the calmest deliberation and force of will I brought all my senses to their greatest activity and walked forward to my duty.

Major Rathbone had bravely fought the assassin. His arm had been severely wounded and was bleeding. He came to me holding his wounded arm in the hand of the other, beseeching me to attend to his wound. I placed my hand under his chin, looking into his eyes, an almost instantaneous glance revealed the fact that he was in no immediate danger, and in response to appeals from Mrs. Lincoln and Miss Harris, who were standing by the high-backed settee in which President Lincoln sat, I went immediately to their assistance, saying I was a United States Army surgeon. I grasped Mrs. Lincoln's outstretched hand in mine while she cried piteously to me: "Oh, Doctor, is he dead? Can he recover? Will you take charge of him? Do not let him die! Oh, my dear husband!" etc. I soothingly answered that we would do all that possibly could be done. While supporting the President, I asked a gentleman who was at the door of the box to procure some brandy and another to get some water.

As I looked at the President, he appeared to be dead. His eyes were closed and his head had fallen forward. He was being held upright in his chair by Mrs. Lincoln, who was weeping bitterly. From his crossed-form sitting posture it was evident that Mrs. Lincoln had instantly sprung to his aid after he had been wounded and had kept him from touching the floor. By Mrs. Lincoln's courage, strength, and energy the President was maintained in his upright position during the short time that elapsed while Major Rathbone had bravely fought



THE HOUSE OPPOSITE FORD'S THEATRE TO WHICH LINCOLN WAS BORNE, AND AT WHICH HE DIED NEXT HOURS LATER WITHOUT REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS

JOHN LINCOLN AS THE MISTRESS OF THE WHITE HOUSE

the assassin and removed the obstruction from the door of the box.

I placed my finger on the President's right radial pulse, but could perceive no movement of the artery. For the purpose of arriving him, if possible, we removed him from his chair to a recumbent position on the floor of the box, and as I held his head and shoulders while doing this, my hand came in contact with a clot of blood near his left shoulder. Remembering the flash-like dagger in the hand of the assassin, and the severely bleeding wound of Major Rathbone, I supposed the President had been stabbed, and while kneeling on the floor over his head, with my eyes continuously watching the President's face, I asked a gentleman to cut the coat and shirt open from the neck to the elbow in middle arc, in pendulum to check the hemorrhage that I thought might take place from the subclavian artery or some other blood vessel. This was done with a dirk knife, but no wound was found there. I lifted his eyelids and saw evidence of a leaden matter. I quickly passed the separated fingers of both hands through his bloody matted hair to examine his head, and then I discovered his mortal wound. The President had been shot in the back part of the head, behind the left ear. I easily removed the clustering clot of blood from the wound, and this relieved the pressure on the brain.

The assassin of President Lincoln had evidently carefully planned to shoot to produce instant death, as the wound he made was situated within two inches of the physiological point of selection when instant death is desired. A Derringer pistol had been used, which held sent a large round ball on its accustomed mission through one of the thickest, hardest parts of the skull and into the brain. The history of surgery fails to record a recovery from such a fearful wound and I have never seen or heard of any other person with such a wound and injury to the sinus of the brain and to the brain itself, who lived even for an hour.

As the President did not then revive, I thought of the other mode of death, apnea, and assumed my preferred position to revive by artificial respiration. I knelt on the floor over the President, with a knee on each side of his pelvis and facing him. I leaned forward, opened his mouth, and introduced two extended fingers of my right hand as far back as possible, and by pressing the base of his paralyzed tongue downward and outward, opened his larynx and made a free passage for air to enter the lungs. I placed an assistant at each of his arms to manipulate them in order to expand his thorax, then slowly to press the arms down by the side of the body, while I pressed the diaphragm upward; methods which convert air to be drawn in and forced out of his lungs. During the intermissions I also, with the strong thumb and fingers of my right hand, by intermittent sliding pressure under and beneath the ribs, stimulated the apex of the heart, and resorted to several other physiological methods. We repeated these motions a number of times before signs of recovery from the previous shock were attained; then a feeble action of the heart and irregular breathing followed.

The effects of the shock were still manifest by such great prostration that I was fearful of any extra agitation of the President's body, and became convinced that something more must be done to retain life. I leaned forcibly forward directly over his body, Thorax to thorax, face to face, and several times drew in a long breath, then forcibly breathed directly into his mouth and nostrils, which expanded his lungs and improved his respirations. After waiting a moment I placed my ear over his thorax and found the action of the heart improving. I arose to the erect kneeling posture, then watched for a short time and saw that the President could continue independent breathing, and that instant death would not occur.

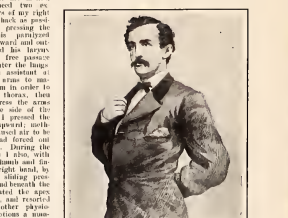
I then pronounced my diagnosis and prognosis: "His wound is mortal; it is impossible for him to recover. This message was telegraphed all over the country.

When the brandy and water arrived, I very slowly poured a small quantity into the President's mouth. This was swallowed and retained.

Many looked on during these earnest efforts to revive the President, but not once did any one suggest a word or in any way interfere with my actions. Mrs. Lincoln had thrown the bonnet on me and asked hour by looking on

In the dimly lighted box of the theatre, so beautifully decorated with American flags, a scene of historic importance was being enacted. On the carpeted floor lay prostrate the President of the United States. His long, outstretched, athletic body of six feet four inches appeared unusually heroic. His bleeding head rested on my white linen handkerchief. His clothing was arranged as nicely as possible. He was irregularly breathing, his heart was feebly beating, his face was pale and in solemn repose; his eyelids were closed, and his countenance much less appear to be in prayerful communion with the Universal God he always loved. I looked down upon him and waited for the next inspiration, which soon came. "Remove to safety." From the time Mrs. Lincoln had placed the President in my charge I had not permitted my attention to be diverted. Again I was asked the nature of his wound, and replied in those exact words: "His wound is mortal; it is impossible for him to recover."

While I was kneeling over the President on the floor, Dr. Charles S. Taft and Dr. Albert F. A. King had come and offered to render any assistance. I expressed the desire to have the President taken, as soon as he had gained sufficient strength, to the nearest house on the opposite side of the street. I was asked by several if he could not be taken to the White House, but I responded that if that were attempted the President would die long before we reached there. While we were waiting for Mr. Lincoln to gain strength, Lamy Keene, who had been taking part in the play,

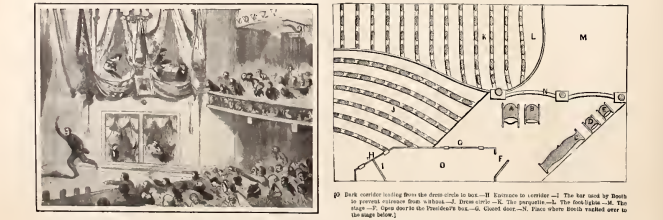


JOHN WILKES BOOTH, THE MURDERER OF LINCOLN

From a wood-cut published in "Harper's Weekly" for April 29, 1865

appealed to me to allow her to hold the President's head. I granted this request, and she sat on the floor of the box and held his head on her lap.

We decided that the President could now be moved from the proximity of danger in the theatre, to a house where we might place him on a bed in safety. To assist in this duty I assigned Dr. Taft to carry his right shoulder, Dr. King to carry his left shoulder, and detailed a sufficient number of others, whose names I have never discovered, to assist in carrying the body, while I carried his head, going first. We reached the door of the box and saw the long passage leading to the exit crowded with people. I called out twice: "Guards, clear the passage! Guards, clear the passage!" A free space was quickly cleared by an officer, and protected by a line of soldiers in the position of present arms with swords, pistols, and bayonets.



Booth's escape from the box in which he shot the President
THE MUTILATED FRONT THE PRESIDENT'S BOX TO THE STAGE AND HARDEN BEHIND THE SCENES, ESCAPING IN THE SUDDEN PANIC BY A HEAD DOOR
From a wood-cut published in "Harper's Weekly" for April 29, 1865

92 Dark corridor leading from the down circle to box.—H Entrance to corridor.—I The bar used by Booth to prevent entrance from without.—J. Down circle.—K. The parquette.—L. The footlights.—M. The stage.—N. Open door to the President's box.—O. Guest door.—N. Place where Booth vaulted over to the stage (below.)

Diagram of the theatre box occupied by President Lincoln
From a wood-cut published in "Harper's Weekly" for April 29, 1865

THE DEATH-BED OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

FROM A PAINTING BY JOHN H. LITTLEFIELD, TO WHOM THE PERSONS IN THE PICTURE GAVE SPECIAL SITTINGS

Copyright, 1868, by John H Littlefield

THE LOG CABIN WHERE, IN HARDIN COUNTY, KENTUCKY, ABRAHAM LINCOLN WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 12, 1809. THE CABIN IS AUTHENTICALLY PRESERVED INTACT AS A MEMORIAL OF THE HUMBLE LIFE FROM WHICH THE PRESIDENT AROSE

THE HOUSE AT EIGHTH STREET AND CAPITOL AVENUE, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, FROM WHICH LINCOLN WENT TO THE WHITE HOUSE IN 1861. THE HOUSE IS NOW USED AS A LINCOLN MUSEUM AND CONTAINS MANY VALUABLE RELICS

When we reached the stairs, I turned so that those holding the President's feet would descend first. At the door of the theatre I was again asked if the President could be taken to the White House. I answered, "No, the President would die on the way."

The crowd on the street completely obstructed the doorway, and a Captain, whose services proved invaluable all through the night, came to me, saying, "Surgeon, give me your commands and I will see that they are obeyed." I asked him to clear a passage to the mansion house opposite. He had on side arms, and the moment he drew the sword and a word of command he cleared the way. We slowly crossed the street. It was necessary to stop several times to give me the opportunity to remove the clot of blood from the opening to the wound. A barrier of men had been formed to keep back the crowds on each side of an open space leading to the house. Those who were ahead reported that the house directly opposite the theatre was closed. I saw a man standing at the door of Mr. Peterson's house, diagonally opposite, holding a lighted candle in his hand and beckoning us to enter. This we did, not having been interrupted to the slightest by the throngs in the street; but a number of the excited populace followed us into the house. The great difficulty of retaining life during this brief time transpired in moving the President from the theatre to Mr. Peterson's house conclusively proved that the President would have died in the street, if I had granted the request to take him such a long distance as to the White House.

I asked for the best room and we soon had the President placed in bed.

He was lifted to the longitudinal centre of the bed and placed on his back. While holding his face upward and keeping his head from rolling to either side, I looked at his elevated knees caused by his feet to leave the room. After we had given the President a short rest I decided to make a thorough physical examination, as I wished to see if he had been wounded in any other part of the body. I requested all except the surgeons to leave the room. The Captain reported that my order had been carried out, with the exception of Mrs. Lincoln, to whom, he said, he did not like to speak. I addressed Mrs. Lincoln, explaining my desire, and she immediately left the room. I examined the President's entire body from his head to his feet and found no other injury. His loose extremities were very cold and I sent the hospital steward, who had been of great assistance to us in removing the President from the theatre, to procure bottles of hot water and hot blankets, which were supplied. I also sent for a large sinapism, and in a short time one very nicely made was brought. This I applied over the solar plexus and to the anterior surface of his body. We arranged the bedclothes, and I assigned Doctor Tafft and Doctor King to keep his head upon the pillows in the most comfortable position, relieving each other in the duty, after which I sent an officer to notify Mrs. Lincoln that she might return to her husband. She came in and sat on a chair placed for her at the head of the bed. As the symptoms indicated cerebral brain compression, I again cleared the opening of clotted blood and pushed forward the button of bone, which acted as a valve, permitted an oozing of blood, and relieved pressure on the brain. I again saw good results from this action.

After doing all that was professionally necessary, I stood aside for a general view and to think what to do next. While thus watching, several army officers anxiously asked if they could in any way assist. I told them my greatest desire then was to send messengers to the White House for the President Surgeon General Joseph K. Barnes; Surgeon D. Willard Bliss, in charge of Armory Square General Hospital; the President's family physician, Dr. Robert K. Stone; and to each member of the President's cabinet. All three desires of mine were fulfilled.

Having been taught in early youth to pay respect to all religious denominations as regards their rules concerning the sick or dying, I left my duty as surgeon in charge of the dying President to summon a clergyman to his bedside. The first officer inquiring and being informed that the Reverend Doctor Gurley was Mrs. Lincoln's pastor, I immediately sent for him.

Thus I sent the hospital steward for a Nelaton probe. No drug or medicine in any form was administered to the President, but the artificial heat and mustard plaster that I had applied warmed his cold body and stimulated his nerves. Only a few were at any time admitted to the room by the officer whom I had stationed at the door, and at all times I had maintained perfect discipline and order.

While we were watching and befitting Nature do her part, Doctor Tafft came to me with brandy and water and asked permission to give some to the President. I objected, stating as my reason that it would produce stimulation. Doctor Tafft left the room, and again came to me stating that it was the opinion of others also that it might do good. I replied, "I will grant the request, if you will please at first try by dipping only a very small quantity into the President's mouth." This Doctor Tafft very carefully did. The liquid ran into the President's larynx, producing laryngeal obstruction and unpleasant symptoms, which took me almost half a minute to overcome; but no hasty harm was done. My physiological and practical experiences had led to correct conclusions.

On the arrival of Dr. Robert K. Stone, who had been the President's family physician during his residence in Washington, I was pleased to hear as the one who had been in charge since the President was shot. I described the wound and the path that had been done. He said he approved of my treatment.

Surgeon-General Joseph K. Barnes' long delay in arriving was due to his going first to the White House, where he expected to find the assassinated President; then to the residence of Secretary Seward and his son, both of whom had been found requiring immediate attention, as they had been severely wounded by the attempts of another assassin to kill them.

On the arrival of the Surgeon-General and Assistant-Surgeon-General Charles B. Crane, I reported what we had done, and officially detailed to the Surgeon-General my diagnosis, stating that whenever the clot was allowed to form over the opening to the wound the President's breathing became greatly embarrassed. The Surgeon-General approved the treatment, and my original plan of treatment was continued in every respect until the President's death.

The hospital steward arrived with the Nelaton probe and an examination was made by the Surgeon-General and myself, who introduced the probe to a distance of about two and a half inches, where it came in contact with a foreign substance which lay across the track of the ball. This was easily passed and the probe was introduced several inches further, where it again touched a hard substance at first supposed to be the ball; but as the white porcelain bulb of the probe, on its withdrawal, did not indicate the mark of lead, it was generally thought to be another piece of bone. The probe was introduced the second time and the ball was supposed to be distinctly felt. After this second exploration nothing further was done with the wound except to keep the opening free from coagula, which if allowed to form and remain for a short time produced signs of increased compression, the breathing becoming profound by stertorous and intermittent, like pulse more feeble and irregular.

After I had resigned my charge all that was professionally done for the President was to repeat occasionally my original application of relieving the brain pressure by freeing the opening to the wound and to count the pulse and respirations. The President's position on the bed remained exactly as I had first placed him, with the assistance of Doctor Tafft and Doctor King.

Captain Robert T. Lincoln came and remained with his father and mother, bravely sustaining himself during the course of the night.

On that awful memorable night the great War Secretary, the Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, one of the most imposing figures of the nineteenth century, promptly arrived and recognized at that critical period of our country's history the necessity of a head to our government, and, as the President was passing away, established a branch of the War Department in an adjoining room. There he sat, surrounded by his couriers and confidential clerks, busily writing to Generals Dix and others. He was soon in communication with many in authority and with the government and army officials. By Secretary Stanton's wonderful

(Continued on page 12)

LINCOLN'S FINAL RESTING-PLACE. THE MONUMENT ERECTED OVER THE TOMB OF THE GREAT EMANCIPATOR IN OAK RIDGE CEMETERY, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, AND THE SCENE OF ELABORATE CENTENARY EXERCISES

great height. This uncomfortable position grieved me, and I ordered the foot of the bed to be removed. Doctor Tafft and Doctor King reported that it was a failure. Then I requested that it be broken off, as I found this could not satisfactorily be done, if had the President placed diagonally on the bed and called for extra pillows, and with them formed a gradual incline, on which to raise the head and shoulders. This position was then one of repose.

The room soon filled with anxious people. I called the officer and asked him to open the window, and order all except the medical gentlemen and friends' son Captain Robert T. Lincoln, also for the